

“Dissatisfaction of Modern Youth” by Christopher E. Sherman, Winter Commencement 1929 (from April 1929 Alumni Monthly)

Perhaps we should know what character is. Faith, I suppose is a part of one's character. Character has been said to be a by-product of work. Perhaps a better definition is that it is 'the average trend of one's choices.' We all make mistakes, but the question is, in what direction are the mistakes continued?"

[Professor Sherman cited a letter written in 1790 by George Washington to Thomas Jefferson in which Washington commented that the people "are emerging from the gulf of dissipation and debt, into which they had precipitated themselves" at the close of the Revolution. By comparison, the speaker remarked, "it should take us 25 years or more, from the World War's end to recover our moral fiber."]

But soon after the recent war ended college attendance greatly increased, and statistics show that a greater proportion than ever are now in college. It was less than seven years after the Great War that you entered college. I cannot call this a vicious tendency. It looks like a strong purpose to me, especially when I see figures showing how many are helping to pay for their schooling at this university.

It is possible that your preparation for college, or your college work here, partook of the World War slump. Workmen slumped on their jobs after the War, perhaps teachers did, too. Maybe parents relaxed in the homes and students in the schools, and officials in public office.

The latter are the only ones on which I have any figures. Such as I found are nothing to compare with the corruption in public office during and after the Civil War. We will carry on through to the end of the War aftermath.

You young people have carried through well, considering the War aftermath. Civilization proceeds in a wavy line, up and down. I cannot say on what part of the line we are now. But I am certain that the averaging line through the waves slopes upward, not downward. You are among those who are helping to push the line up.

[The college professor is] greatly desired in the world. In engineering the supply is far below the demand. [In my own student days 35 years ago the graduate received "scant favor" in some quarters.]

What of the world into which you go? I think the deeper current of American spirit is clear and strong. Lindbergh, I think, measured popular spirit. Not the mere spectacle of a dazzling feat, but his good sense and modesty after that feat stirred the people most deeply. These two qualities, it seemed for a time after the War, had faded in American esteem.

[During the election last fall] more people were stirred to vote than ever before in the history of the world... These votes were cast not for an emperor or king, nor for a conquering Napoleon, but for a country blacksmith's son, noted for giving his strength to good works, and for another poor boy who had resisted the vices a great city has to offer to raise himself to the highest station in the gift of his state.

These are the largest present-day facts I can think of. In them I see no sagging from the highest American ideals.

[But there is] plenty of housecleaning to do in the land... [he praises the newspapers as a social agency, but condemns] so much crime and casualty, not to say scandal, on their front pages.

Judged by our newspapers and novels in matters of crime and sex, we are mentally morbid... Yet, apart from crime features, our American papers are the most attractive in the

world. Our papers give by far the most space to humor, as judged by comic strips and non-propagandist cartoons. Even though crude, is not humor one of the high marks of sanity?

You who are to take up Journalism, is not the promotion of human interest a part of your high calling? Should it not be a healthy interest? You can help gradually to mend our morbid tastes.

I noticed with pleasure on one recent front page a scientist's picture so large that I feared at first glance that he was up for a crime. Will Rogers has now been placed on some front pages. Who knows what may happen to our daily front page in the next few years? We shall raise the general level of novels and magazines, too.

[Alumni Monthly summarizes Sherman's classifications of various professions]

The spirit, the vision is the thing, because it lights up the labor. And the labor's the thing, for it strengthens the vision. Your knowledge has given you vision. You have seen your peaks, your glistening summits, far clearer than I.

I envy you the strength and vigor of youth, and would join you. Your way may be over a dusty plain, through thorny veldt, or sunbaked rocks, but the mountain is there at the end. With high hope, and strong purpose, and your eye on the peak, I bid you strike into the dusty plain.